

Enhancing Internet literacy as a health promotion strategy for refugees and migrants

Peter Sturgess and Christine Philips

Australia has a large intake of migrants and refugees each year and the relocation process can be distressing. Training in Internet literacy can improve employment opportunities and communication^{1,2} but its use as a health promotion strategy for this group is unexplored. We report a pilot program exploring teaching Internet literacy as a strategy for enhancing the health and well-being of newly arrived refugees and migrants.

The target population was refugees or migrants who had arrived in Australia in the past five years. The course, based at the Migrant and Refugee Settlement Services of the ACT (MARSS), was a competency-based program taught in one-to-one mode, with each student being assigned a volunteer medical student teacher for 12 weekly one-hour classes. Coursework covered basic computer navigation, Internet browsing, using USB memory sticks and using email and Facebook applications. Health and well-being changes were assessed using a modification of validated tools used in the Good Starts Study for Refugee Youth,³ addressing well-being, health and use of internet at baseline, immediately after the program and at three months after program completion.

Participants were two African refugees, two South American migrants and one migrant from the South Pacific. All participants reported an increase in confidence at using the computer and the Internet after course completion, with extension of skills into new domains of Internet use reported at three months. The two refugees were the most prolific users of Facebook; both reported finding friends and family who had been separated from them because of the war in their home country and subsequent relocation. All participants had a higher well-being score immediately after the intervention, and at three months, all had a higher well-being score than at baseline. Both Africans and the migrant from the South Pacific used the Internet to maintain connectedness with members of their community around the world.

This small study found that improvements in health and well-being may be used as outcome measures of information technology training programs using one-to-one tutelage for newly arrived refugees and migrants. These changes may be more marked in refugees or migrants from diasporic countries. Improvements may reflect the facility of participants with Internet skills to counter community disarticulation, better participate in their host country's social transactions and enhance their own employability.

Reduction of acculturation stress for newly arrived migrants and refugees should be a priority for settlement services. Brief training support programs addressing Internet competence may mitigate acculturation stress.

References

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Authors

Peter Sturgess, Australian National University, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory

Christine Philips, Australian National University Medical School, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory

Correspondence

Peter Sturgess, Medical Student, Australian National University, Peter Baume Building 42a, Canberra, ACT 0200. Fax: (02) 6125 8877; e-mail: u4366237@anu.edu.au